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Bruce E. Mahan

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The Discovery of Iowa

On the seventeenth of June, 1923, two men stood on the heights above McGregor, Iowa, and gazed upon the panorama of river and tree-clad islands below, and the sweep of Wisconsin farm land in the distance. One wore the long black cassock, the cincture, the crucifix, and the shovel-board hat of a Jesuit missionary of the seventeenth century, while the other was clad in the fringed coat, trousers, and moccasins of a *coureur de bois* of New France. Both were Iowa men — one impersonating the brave but gentle Father Jacques Marquette, the other enacting the rôle of the intrepid and skilled Louis Joliet — who, with boatmen five, newspaper representatives, and cameramen, were that afternoon about to start on a two hundred and fifty mile replica voyage in commemoration of the discovery of Iowa.

Far below them a ferry boat churned its way up the channel toward the pontoon railroad bridge. Horseshoe Island, with its graceful curves and luxuriant foliage, presented a bit of nature's landscape gardening. Across the Mississippi, framed in a setting of green-topped hills and bluffs that merged into soft blue haze in the distance, lay the quaint old French town of Prairie du Chien. Above the trees to the southeast loomed the towers of Campion College. Farther north gleamed the limestone ruins of

Old Fort Crawford above which the Stars and Stripes were proudly waving, a reminder of the importance of this frontier post in the days of the fur traders. The spacious buildings and lawns of St. Mary's College were visible on a gently sloping hillside, where amid a riot of color, Wisconsin citizens were celebrating the discovery of the Mississippi with a pageant, "The Father of Waters".

Some four miles below, the gentle current of the Wisconsin River disembogued into the swifter flowing Mississippi almost opposite the bold promontory now called Pike's Hill. It was there, two hundred and fifty years ago, that "we safely entered the Missisipi on the 17th of June, with a joy that I cannot express", wrote Father Marquette. On the seventeenth of June, 1923, the replica *voyageurs* floated out upon the choppy surface of the mighty river, not perhaps with joy but with wonder at the magnificence of the view. The mountainous range of bluffs dominated by Pike's Hill overshadowed the river on the west, while scallops of green-clad hills with layers of outcropping limestone framed the scene on the east, back of the flood plain along the shore.

Turning downstream, the explorers of 1923 beheld new features at every bend of the river. New scenic delights greeted them on every hand, much as the view must have charmed the adventurers of two and a half centuries ago. Islands, willow fringed and crowned with cottonwoods, maples, and elms, ap-

peared; the river widened and the sun dipped in a blaze of color behind the western hills. Then came modern touches of life and action. A lumbering freight train thundered along the base of the cliffs and the engineer whistled a noisy greeting. Clam muckers watched the symbolical voyage pass by, amazement pictured on their faces. Passengers on an upstream packet waved handkerchiefs and shouted salutations. Twilight settled down and yellow gleams atop the light boards along the shore marked the course of the channel. Guttenberg appeared off the starboard bow and two paleface braves in Indian garb put out in a canoe from shore bearing a message of welcome and an invitation to spend the night as guests of the town.

How different must have been the first night passed by the seven Frenchmen along the Iowa shore two hundred and fifty years ago! Then, as the golden sun sank to rest behind the bluffs and twilight fell, they pushed the prows of their two birch-bark canoes ashore. Stretching their cramped limbs they prepared to do their simple cooking. A tiny campfire was built with dry driftwood and in the glowing embers they cooked their frugal meal of Indian corn and smoked meat. Perhaps a fish caught on a towline added a supply of tasty food. Father Marquette invoked a blessing, and they all ate heartily after the day of paddling and the thrill of a great achievement. A short rest, a pipeful of fragrant tobacco, and then the boatmen extinguished

the red coals of their dying campfire and again launching their canoes, the party floated a few miles farther on to spend the night. When darkness spread its sable robes over the river they anchored at some distance from the shore, and a boatman watched while the others slept.

At sunrise they were on their way. Once a huge fish struck Marquette's canoe with such violence that the frail craft was nearly overturned. The great sturgeon which "rushed through the water like hungry sharks" excited their admiration and the curious paddle fish aroused their wonder. Herds of deer and buffalo were seen and wild turkeys made a welcome addition to their meager food supply, but no sign of human habitation met their searching gaze. They seemed to be alone on the long sweeps of the broad Mississippi with its changing kaleidoscope of wooded islands and sand bars, its tree-covered bluffs and open spaces alternating along the banks, and its wide surface, now smooth as glass, now churned to white-capped angry waves by a stiff south wind. Every night, however, they took precautions against a surprise attack. Thus they journeyed along the eastern shore of the Iowa land during that eventful month of June, 1673.

The river then flowed untrammelled to the sea, but the *voyageurs* of 1923 saw on every hand the attempts of man to subdue the spirit of the Mississippi and to control its moods. Wing dams made of woven willows weighted down by limestone rocks directed

the current into the channel. Government dredges and snag boats puffed upstream pushing barges piled high with willows. Dingy steamboats nosed along barges heavily loaded with sand and rock repairs for the levees. Red buoys and black buoys slowly bobbing in the water and light boards and diamond boards at intervals along the shore made modern navigation easy.

An excursion boat, gleaming white in the glaring sun, appeared around an island downstream and, with black smoke pouring from the twin stacks, it approached and passed on the port side, following the deepest part of the channel. The high swells made by its large stern paddle wheel tossed the small canoes of the replica explorers like chips. Spray from the plunging bows dashed over the boatmen, drenching their costumes and glistening on the fringed coat of Joliet and the black robe of Marquette.

A herd of cattle standing knee deep in the water far out on a sand bar took the place of the buffalo and deer that were seen by the original explorers. A sail boat manned by a sunburnt, barefoot boy dashed athwart the bow of the accompanying launch and careened at a dangerous angle as he doubled back to watch the flotilla pass. He yelled and waved, and his companion, a fox terrier, barked excitedly. Fishermen in motor dories trailed their lines and waved a salute in passing. Sandy bathing beaches and summer cottages with pleasant names — Wood-

side, Chalet, Three Elms, and Idlewild — suggested cool retreats from the scorching heat. A cluster of houseboats with drying reels and fish racks marked the approach to a city. Then in the distance appeared the graceful outline of a high-arched traffic bridge and the squatty, rugged framework of a railroad bridge — signals for the readjustment of wigs and the refashioning of French beards. A scheduled stop lay just ahead.

No such sights greeted the original *voyageurs*. Not a canoe, not a hut or tepee, not a single sign of human life did they descry for eight days. Finally on the twenty-fifth of June, 1673, as the exploring party drifted along the Iowa shore, one of the group noticed footprints on the sandy beach near the water's edge. Quickly the canoes were beached and the two leaders, unarmed, started out to follow the marks in the sand, leaving their five companions to guard the supplies. It was a bold action for the explorer and the missionary, for neither knew what dangers lurked at the end of the narrow, somewhat beaten path which led up the bank to the prairie.

Silently following the slender trail for about two leagues — five or six miles — they beheld an Indian village on the bank of a river and two others on a hill about a mile from the first. Here the two Frenchmen commended themselves to God, imploring His aid, and then cautiously approached without being noticed until they could hear the Indians talking.

On that quiet day in June the beauty of early summer had settled upon the Mississippi Valley. The streets of the Indian villages were quiet, smoke curled slowly above the lodges, and the murmur of voices drifted through the open doorways. Inside, Indian women pounded corn into meal in heavy bowls while the braves lolled at ease on the blankets or mended bows and smoked long-stemmed pipes. Blinking papooses, brown bundles of stolid indifference or squalling animation, leaned in cradle-boards against the walls.

Suddenly the village was startled into life. A loud shout from the strangers announced their approach. The two messengers from France stopped to watch the effect. In a moment the villagers swarmed out into the sunlight, pipes were tossed aside, broken bows were forgotten, and the women ceased their work to rush about in wild excitement. As quickly as it began the tumult quieted. Someone had recognized the strangers as Frenchmen and friends; someone in the village, doubtless, knew whence the visitors came; someone, perhaps, had seen the energetic fur traders and the black-robed priests on the shore of Lake Superior or beside the waters of Green Bay.

Four old men stepped out of the crowd and advanced toward the strangers. Slowly they walked, two of them holding aloft in the bright sunlight finely ornamented tobacco pipes adorned with multi-colored feathers. Not a word did they speak as with

solemn tread they slowly covered the distance between the village and the white men. Finally, as they drew near, they stopped and gazed attentively, yet with respect, at the visitors. Thereupon, Father Marquette, assured that the solemn approach of the four old men was meant as a courteous welcome, asked in Indian dialect, "Who are you?"

"We are Illinois", the old men answered, and as a token of peace they offered the strangers the calumets to smoke, and invited them to enter the village.

Together the four Indians and their guests approached the cluster of lodges where the Indians awaited them impatiently. At the door of one of the huts stood an old man, with his hands extended toward the sun. As the group drew near the old man spoke, "How beautiful is the sun, O Frenchmen, when thou comest to visit us! All our village awaits thee, and thou shalt enter all our cabins in peace."

Then he bade them enter his lodge where a crowd of savages looked upon the visitors in curious yet respectful silence. From time to time in a low voice came the words, "How good it is, my brothers, that you should visit us." Again the pipe of peace was passed, first to the strangers and then to the elders. During this ceremony of friendship a messenger arrived bearing an invitation from the great chief of all the Illinois to proceed to his village for a council.

Thither they set out, the black-gown and the explorer and the elders accompanied by a great crowd of Indian braves, squaws, and children. The un-

usual sight of two Frenchmen in their village attracted all of the Indians. Some lay in the grass along the path and watched the procession pass, others ran on ahead and then retraced their steps in order to see the strangers again. Yet all this was done noiselessly and with great awe of the white men.

When the procession reached the village of the big chief he was beheld standing at the entrance of his lodge between two old men. All three stood erect and naked, holding their calumets high toward the glowing sun. The chief welcomed the party and drew them within his cabin. Again they smoked the calumet in silence, and the Indians awaited the message of the white men. Father Marquette spoke first and, following the custom with the Indians, gave them four presents, each the token of a message.

With the first he told them that he, Jacques Marquette, a priest of the Jesuit Order, and his companion, Louis Joliet, were journeying peacefully to visit the tribes dwelling on the river as far as the sea. With the second token he announced that God, who had created them, had pity on them and, wishing to make Himself known to all people, had sent the priest for that purpose. Then he gave them a third present saying that the great chief of the French had subdued the Iroquois and had restored peace everywhere. Finally, with the fourth gift, he begged the Illinois to give him and his companion all the information they had about the sea and the na-

tions through whose land they must pass to reach it.

When the black-gown finished speaking the chief arose, and resting his hand upon the head of a little Indian boy, a captive slave, he spoke thus, "I thank thee, Black-gown, and thee, O Frenchman, for having taken so much trouble to come to visit us. Never has the earth been so beautiful or the sun so bright as to-day. Never has our river been so calm or so free from rocks, which thy canoes have removed in passing. Never has our tobacco tasted so good or our corn appeared so fine as we now see it. Here is my son whom I give thee to show thee my heart. I beg thee to have pity on me, and on all my nation. It is thou who knowest the great Spirit who has made us all. It is thou who speakest to Him, and who hearest His word. Beg Him to give me life and health, and to come to dwell with us, in order to make us know Him."

Then the chief placed the captive Indian boy near the visitors and gave them a second present, a long-stemmed calumet, elaborately carved and decorated with feathers signifying peace. It was to be a talisman for the rest of the journey. With a third present he begged the visitors on behalf of his nation to go no farther on account of the dangers that lay ahead. Marquette replied that he feared not death and regarded no happiness greater than that of losing his life for the glory of Him who had made them all. This sentiment amazed all the Indians, but they made no reply and the council ended.

A feast followed. During the progress of the council Indian women had hurried to prepare a meal worthy of the occasion. Young girls now brought into the lodge the food which the squaws had made ready. The first course was sagamité—Indian corn meal boiled in water and seasoned with fat. An Indian, acting as master of ceremonies, filled a spoon and presented it several times to the mouths of the visitors as if they were children. Then the maidens brought fresh from the fire a second platter on which lay three smoking fish. The same Indian took some pieces of this, removed the bones and, after blowing upon the morsels to cool them, placed the fish in the mouths of the Frenchmen as he had fed them the sagamité. For the third course they brought a large dog freshly killed and roasted for the occasion, but when they learned that their guests did not eat that delicacy, it was removed. The fourth course was roast buffalo meat, the fattest and choicest morsels of which were given the priest and his companion.

When the feast ended the hosts conducted the Frenchmen through the entire village consisting of fully three hundred lodges. During this tour an orator harangued the people to see the visitors without annoying them. Everywhere the natives presented their new friends with gifts—belts, garters, and bracelets made of hair dyed red, yellow, and gray. When nightfall came the explorers slept in the cabin of the chief as his honored guests.

On the afternoon of the next day Marquette and Joliet took leave of the chief promising to pass his village again within four moons. They retraced their steps along the trail to the Mississippi, courteously accompanied by nearly six hundred Indians. On the Iowa bank of the Father of Waters the Indians watched the white men settle themselves in their canoes, taking with them the Indian slave boy who was destined to share their adventures in the Great Valley. The sun was midway down the sky when they shoved off from the shore and slowly paddled downstream amid the shouts of the Indians in manifestation of their joy at the visit of the gallant strangers.

Thus ended the first visit of white men to Iowa. Two hundred and fifty years later the replica *voyageurs* encountered much the same hospitality, friendliness, and kindly interest that the original travellers met when they visited the Illinois Indians. Hundreds of Iowans at McGregor, Guttenberg, Dubuque, Bellevue, Clinton, Davenport, Muscatine, Burlington, Fort Madison, and Montrose met the explorers of 1923 at the water front, looked at them in friendly curiosity, and then adopted them as honored guests. They harangued the travellers and the *voyageurs* responded. Redmen in full regalia added color to the welcome at the landings. The trip became a continuous pageant in commemoration of an important episode in Iowa history. Each city feasted the party, gave them presents, and showed them

places of interest. The modern explorers were taken to the Abbey of New Melleray where Trappist monks practice the rules of an order founded almost six hundred years before the discovery of Iowa; they visited the quaint village of Tête des Mort, a bit of rural Europe in an Iowa valley; they inspected the United States Arsenal at Rock Island; and they went through the government Biological Station at Fairport.

Finally, at the beautiful Crapo Park of Burlington, in a natural amphitheater overlooking the river, with green trees for a background and a vista of wooded islands and rolling prairies in the distance, was reënacted the welcome of Marquette and Joliet by the Illinois Indians. Jesuit priest and French explorer, Indian braves, chiefs, old men, squaws, and children, appearing before an audience of thousands of people, caught and reflected the spirit of the first visit of white men to Iowa. Then followed an eloquent address by a priest of the same missionary order to which Father Marquette belonged. Appropriate ceremonies at Bluff Park, Montrose, culminated the ten day celebration in honor of the discovery of Iowa and the first visit of white men to her borders.

As the sun was midway down the sky the replica *voyageurs* set out for home in a launch, towing the two canoes. Darkness overtook them, and in the north jagged flashes of lightning silhouetted the bluffs and trees on the shoreline. The heavy rumble

of thunder echoed down the valley. A train rushed past, the glare of the headlight piercing the darkness and the flare from the opened fire box revealing the fireman. Then the rain! Curtains hastily lowered protected the travellers who had endured ten days of stifling heat on the river without a suggestion of a storm. At last the docks loomed ahead out of the darkness and the launch slid into its quarters. The *voyageurs* of 1923 had rediscovered the Father of Waters and the friendliness of the people who to-day inhabit the Iowa country.

BRUCE E. MAHAN